Developmental Stories
Lessons from Systemic Change for Utilizing the New Common Core Standards for Transforming Education

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Executive Summary

Realizing the Potential of the New Common Core Standards
The introduction of the new Common Core State Standards CCSS has mesmerized the U.S. with a unifying approach to transforming American education. The promise is that clarity and shared understanding of a small set of common standards could liberate the education system to innovate towards foster deeper learning and developing all students as world-class thinkers, problems solvers, and collaborators for today’s world.

The risk is that educators and politicians look for yet another silver bullet. Coupling the standards with two cross state consortia responsible for developing assessment systems for each standard may result in an unwieldy proposition with little impact in the classroom for years, if ever. CCSS Implementation could go the wrong way if:
- CCSS simply become new targets that educators must meet,
- teachers are evaluated based on simplistic measures of these targets,
- fear of failure and risk avoidance increase,
- a cottage industry of fragmented quick-fix nostrums arises that siphons off energy for deeper and longer-term change strategies, or
- the CCSS is perceived as too difficult and simply gets ignored.

Our view is that the new Common Core State Standards represent a unique window of opportunity to bring significant innovations to a much larger scale if they are coupled with three different developments:
• innovation in the curriculum-instruction-assessment nexus
• commitment to organized, high-leverage capacity building at all levels; and
• new understanding of and methods for ‘whole system change.’

Thinking about the future is inherent in the education enterprise. We believe the challenges that today’s students will face in their careers and lives represent an imperative for deep and ongoing innovation in education to better prepare them as contributors and leaders in a world of:
- Rich and rapidly changing technology
- Interdependence of economics, finance, food & water, energy, security
- Unsustainable patterns of social and ecological imbalances
- Vast untapped human & social capital within organizations and society
Basic Innovation in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
The CCSS will have real impact to the extent that they help bring about changes in what and how learning occurs. We need a new consensus on the overall aims of education, and we then must use this as a lens to prioritize changes in curriculum and pedagogy in line with the CCSS. While it is still far-too-rare, we have found a few school districts that have undertaken serious, multi-stakeholder processes to rethink their aims. For example, one school system we have studied has been guided for almost twenty years by the goals of developing

- Complex thinkers
- Community contributors
- Collaborative workers
- Quality producers
- Self-directed learners
- Effective communicators

These aims typify diverse efforts to identify higher-order, 21st century skills. As consensus on such “higher order” skills builds, educators can also show how they relate to the basic skills embedded in traditional curricula. Many accomplished innovators in schools argue that there is no real trade-off between the two: if done effectively, focusing on higher-order skills like those above can increase student (and teacher) engagement and accelerate and deepen the mastery of basic skills as well. Corroborating this assertion needs to become a research priority.

But there is little doubt that the how of school learning is changing in diverse settings. While there is a tendency to see technology as driving these changes, we believe the deeper driving forces are a maturing of many developments in learner-centered instructional design. Schools have long been more teacher-centric than learner-centric, substituting the semblance of teacher control for deep learning for all students. To state the obvious: teaching is a means not an end.

Over the past decades, much has been learned about the diverse ways in which learners learn, the multiple intelligences they bring to the process, and the basics of the learning process itself like the importance of salience, active experimentation, and constructed sense-making (versus imposed interpretations). Sadly, far too little of this can be seen in typical classrooms. But this is changing. The days when teachers stand in front of classrooms and deliver boring lectures to passive students sitting in neat rows based on pre-determined curriculum that engage neither are (or should be) over. There really are alternatives that are being demonstrated daily by gifted teachers who focus on

- designing the learning space, starting with why this subject matters,
- engaging students in meaningful real-life problems, and
- facilitating students learning with and from one another.

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1 The Tahoma Schools, a suburban-rural system south of Seattle, Washington [www.tahomasd.us](http://www.tahomasd.us)
2 This short list draws from many different efforts to articulate 21st Century skills - for example, see The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, [http://www.p21.org](http://www.p21.org); ... ADD References to 21st Century books and networks: e.g., Wagner, *Global Achievement Gap* and *Creating Collaborators*, Darling-Hammond,...
Obviously, the journey from the traditional teacher-centric classroom to a learner-centric one is monumental, which is a primary reason that capacity building strategies to support teachers are pivotal. But we believe the results for students and teachers alike will gradually provide more than ample motivation.

Lastly, it is critical at this time to rethink profound confusions around assessment.

First, it must be understood that assessment in its most basic meaning is inseparable from learning itself. If a small child cannot tell the difference between three steps and ten, she cannot learn how to walk. Learners judging how they are doing relative to their aims is integral to any learning process. But, the challenge of assessment in schools is complicated by the multiple stakeholder environment – in particular, students, teachers, local- and system administrators, and external stakeholders.

Many of the most successful innovations in instructional design serve to integrate experimentation and assessment for learner and teacher. For example, in sophisticated collaborative learning classrooms, much of the class-time is occupied by learners thinking and conversing together about the subject matter. This not only engages them more directly in their own learning, it frees much of the teacher’s time to observe how each student is doing. For example, in problem-solving contexts typical to math and much science, students can see directly what they understand and what they do not, and by helping one another they advance their understanding in natural ways. As importantly, the teacher-observer can judge how individual students are doing and make adjustments – such as offering mentoring specific to a learner, pausing the class to see which students can explain particular challenge to all, or re-composing student groups to make sure that students having difficulty are paired with others likely to help them.

Periodic tests then complement this process by providing teacher and student with additional feedback to enhance the efforts of both, rather than being solitary data on student performance. In settings not focused on well-defined technical problems, the process works largely the same so long as learning tasks are clear and compelling for the students – for example, we have seen first-grade students deeply engaged helping one another on their “research tasks,” from understanding what makes an archaeological dig increase or decrease in value to how much water their school is using.

But today’s assessment confusion stems also from unclarity regarding, “Assessing for Who and for What Purpose?” As illustrated above, teachers and students need to be immersed in evidence-based assessing daily as a by-product of effective instructional design. But, this very detailed, immediate data is far less useful for a school principal or a superintendent. For them, judging students’ engagement and reflections are helpful, especially supplemented by periodic testing instruments.

But what has most confounded schools in recent years is how best to enable meaningful assessment by concerned external stakeholders like parents, school boards and community members. For these external stakeholders, standardized test scores are often appropriate, but compared to what and over what time horizon? Failure to think through
these questions carefully has led to perverse practices like publishing individual teacher
test scores and expecting improvement in overall school or system performance in time
frames far too short to allow for significant changes in processes and practices, and for
building the capacities to implement them.

As a consequence, the tragedy for far too many schools today is that they are applying
performance indicators appropriate for external stakeholders like test scores in their own
internal management. The data from standardized test scores are far too coarse and
infrequent to help teachers adjust their instructional strategies. Trying to improve learning
based on such data is like trying to manage a business based on quarterly or annual return
on investment figures. ROI is a perfectly appropriate indicator for investors but when
used mindlessly by managers contributes to the short life expectancy of a great many
businesses.

**High-Leverage Capacity Building**

Creating capabilities to sustain innovation in what and how teaching is done demands
sophisticated strategies for individual and collective capacity at all levels: teachers,
building leaders, and system leaders. A coherent capacity building strategy will embrace
the three aspects of what we call the “strategic architecture” for sustaining deep change:
compelling *guiding ideas*; well-tested *theory, tools and methods*; and *learning
infrastructures*.

Guiding ideas start with clarity on overall aims, as illustrated above, but include both
visions and strategy. In one school system we studied they distinguished carefully
between changes in “program” and “culture,” and used this framework to help people
understand the more tangible and intangible aspects of new strategic initiatives.3

In our paper, we summarize many tools and methods that have become a mainstay of our
work over the years, most of which have the dual aim of helping people deal with
practical problems and shifting the ways they think about those problems.

But, translating compelling aims and effective tools into the day-to-day world of teachers
and students only happens through effective learning infrastructures that organize the
resources (eg., time and money) through, for example:

- hands-on experiential workshops to introduce tools and methods for instructional
  and management innovation,
- on-site coaching for teachers and administrators, and especially
- peer learning networks.

All three are needed, and we view them as cumulative in the sense that the first and
second build toward the third. It is only through vibrant peer learning networks that you
can sustain innovation. While educators are familiar with terms like ‘professional
learning communities’ (PLCs), we find that the strategic importance of robust peer
learning networks can easily be lost in an historically individualistic profession like

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3 Maplewood-Richmond Heights in St Louis, www.mrhsd.org
teaching. For example, emphasizing innovation in the classroom can often translate to focusing on particular ‘hero teachers’ as the innovators and completely miss the importance of larger collaborative networks. Indeed, one of our biggest lessons from working over two decades in helping teacher leaders and administrators is the leverage for sustaining capacity building that lays in creating a culture where people continually learn with and from one another.

Lastly, we always emphasize that capacity building “is for everyone,” not just for a special few. Often in schools capacity building opportunities for teachers, like coaching, are only for certain people. Sometimes this is driven by budget constraints, but sometimes it is also driven by performance assessment, either special opportunities for high achieving teachers or remedial help for poorer ones. Either way, making capacity building available selectively has problems. It can easily create insider and outsider groups. It often carries either a badge of accomplishment or a stigma of remediation. Similarly, we find that principals and system leaders supporting the capacity building process often do not engage sufficiently themselves. This sends strong signals that can undermine the larger aims of building a culture where “everyone is a learner.” It is easy to underestimate how radical such a culture is within traditional school cultures based on teachers as experts. As one teacher recently observed, “If you feel really confident, that means you probably are not pushing yourself. In order to apply this knowledge with kids, you will need to show your vulnerability, and that is the roadblock. We teachers are the worst at that”.

It is common today to hear political speeches about the need to improve the quality of teachers in American schools. This is then often followed by advocacy for attracting more talented teachers, or paying them better, or, as is common today, creating tougher processes of assessing teacher effectiveness and getting incompetent teachers removed. What is often missed is the leverage of improving the developmental processes for teachers and for the administrators who shape their working environment. Investing effectively in this developmental process is one of the highest leverage changes we know of for sustaining innovation in schools. It improves teacher quality and student achievement. It increases retention of teachers and administrators truly committed to their craft. It makes clearer who is not committed to their ongoing development and easier for them to step aside. It can transform the overall school climate to make education a more and more attractive profession for talented young people. And it helps shape a culture of managerial leadership that ensures all of the above. Simplistic fixes to get rid of low performers and hire higher performers will accomplish little without transforming the systems that shape how educators learn.

**Whole System Change**

In the paper, we summarize many aspects of the evolving field of systemic change and emphasize a few basics like

1. **No One Size Fits All.** There are no formulas. Effective change strategies must be

home grown, tailored to the realities of each setting and context, to culture and history, to existing skills and leadership capabilities in place, and to the particular challenges and problems that must be faced here.

2. You Must Build Leadership Capacity at all Levels. Give up the simplistic notion that only those at the top can create real change. A major limitation on efforts at systemic change comes with the historically hierarchal we think about leadership; the challenges that must be faced are far too diverse and emergent to be successfully met by ‘leadership from the top’ only. In our experience, you must continually develop:

- system leaders who shape an overall environment for change, are role models for their own learning and work continually to build alignment among diverse stakeholders both within the formal school system (e.g., among schools and with central office) and beyond
- building leaders (teachers, principals and other local administrators) who are where the “rubber meets the road” in influencing student learning, and
- community- and “network” leaders who cross boundaries and influence the overall environment in which schools operate, including leadership from the students themselves, the ultimate boundary crossers who, more than anyone, see all aspects of how the true “system of education” works.

3. Leadership Capacity is Collaboration Capacity. Isolated heroes can produce isolated changes but not ongoing systemic innovation. Success in systemic change demands a relentless focus on collaboration – individuals in teams, larger professional networks, and ultimately networks of institutions (e.g., schools and school districts) – as part of the change process itself. This is easy to espouse but difficult to do effectively because it depends on skills and support structures that are often missing.

4. Think Developmentally. Systemic change does not arise from pulling a few magic levers but as a consequence of continuous processes of development, collectively and individually. In the paper, we present an explicit developmental framework, a synthesis of many people’s work in exploring human development in the context of complex institutional change. But the most important point is the most basic point: the naïve fantasy that there exists such a thing as systemic change independent of deep and continual personal change fails to prepare people for the real work. The “system” in terms of the habits of thought and action that shape practices, processes, structures and even metrics lives inside of each of us. It works the way it works because of how we work. What is most systemic is most personal. Consequently, all processes of real systemic change inevitably arise from developmental processes that are deeply personal.

5. Focus on a Few High Leverage Areas and Build Momentum: Leaders at any level can only do so much, and getting scattered among too many initiatives is always a danger. Effective leaders strive for “simplexity,” finding the smallest number of high-leverage, easy-to-understand actions that can unleash powerful consequences. In particular, they look for those that create self-reinforcing and self-sustaining ‘virtuous cycles’ of results and further engagement. In particular,

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\(^5\) Fullan, M, *Motion Leadership*, ibid. p.16
since significant change usually takes considerable time to achieve, it is important to build momentum through shorter-term improvements. When done well, whole system change creates 'coherence' or 'social glue' where more and more people develop system mindsets and identities that connect them to one another and to a larger shared purpose.

**Challenges**

As there more and more practical examples of applying these principles and tools, we also start to see the recurring challenges that must be expected, like

1. **The anxiety of systemic change.** Helping teachers change their practice is never easy, any more than is helping principals and superintendents change how they manage. When we use the term ‘capacity building,” it can often mask the depth of the emotional and psychological challenges, as we implied above in emphasizing the personal character of systemic change. Much of the paper is devoted to understanding the individual developmental journeys of leaders at all levels in facing these challenges, from which two factors have become paramount.

   The first, peer learning communities, means knowing that “we are all in this together.” Beyond the foreground of each person’s particular developmental and technical learning challenges are shared challenges that arise from evolving beyond the teacher-centric, centrally controlled model of the Industrial Age School. When people see that what is common to their challenges exceeds what is idiosyncratic, it gives them far greater confidence in taking bold steps.

   The second is gradually building confidence that real progress is possible. As even small steps are accomplished, people can become engaged in the improvements they are experiencing and then let gradually let go of fears that they do not have all the answers (no one does). Slowly, they realize that “journey is the reward” and the only way to implement change is to implement change.

2. **Impatience for quick improvements in the face of changes that require long-term capacity building.** Balancing short-term needs and expectations with longer-term development goals constitutes a timeless challenge of leadership. Often, two deeper problems lay behind what makes these natural pressures feel unmanageable by everyone from teachers to superintendents and board members.

   First, key stakeholders are not sufficiently engaged. If people are not close enough to where change is occurring, they have little confidence in or direct understanding of the change process. For example, if you want to get you board members engaged in deeper changes make sure they spend time in innovative classroom, seeing teachers engaging students in new ways. If they feel like partners in the process, they will start to appreciate more realistically the time frames needed for real change and become an ally in spreading this understanding.
Second, stakeholders who start to appreciate the change process will help you establish clear interim goals that are on a pathway toward longer-term aims. This is always needed. How do we know we are on track toward our longer-term aims? Answering this question is never easy and usually benefits from multiple points of view when different stakeholders take the time to become directly engaged. But it is part of the responsibilities of any manager who seeks to bring about systemic change.

3. What about those who are not ready for the journey? Not everyone will be up for what is involved in a systemic change process. But how changes in personnel come about matters. In particular, as stated above, the fad of wholesale removal of teachers and administrators is a simplistic “fix” that can have many unintended side effects, like encouraging other schools to do anything (including outright falsification of results) to not suffer the same fate. On the other hand, to make a clear commitment to compelling overarching aims and capacity building to realize them creates a powerful context to see who is ready. In such a case, turnover will become a by-product of building a culture committed to individual and collective development in service of accountability for student learning.

In one of the examples we develop in depth in the paper, a medium sized urban district serving a 70-95% free and reduced lunch student population significantly enhanced student learning over the past five years, including on standard performance metrics. Of the 50 administrators who were there when the change process started, four remain today. The changes occurred partly through natural attrition and partly through helping people move on. “It is important to not just blame people or to come in and demand that they change,” said the Assistant Superintendent who was a key leader in the change process. “People were behaving as they were for a reason. As you develop and implement new processes and structures, you have to wait and watch to see who can grow into making them effective.” She then added, “I am passionate about coaching people along their own developmental path, regardless of where they start from… But you can’t coach people who are not coachable. At some point… people need to see that, if we are not doing a good job, it hurts the children. Everyone must understand that it is always about the students.”

**Action Steps**

Bringing about such change will be neither quick nor easy. Still, never have the conditions for basic innovation been more opportune. The world is changing in profound ways, and the need to focus on higher-order “21st century skills” is increasingly recognized. The gap between the privileged and the underserved in American schools has been growing for a generation. The revitalization of teaching as a profession of choice shows signs of becoming a national priority. In this sense, meeting the new Common Core Standards is not an end in itself but a potentially powerful means for systemic change.
We believe the next stage of this work should be to expand and connect existing networks of innovative schools to prototype a distributed learning community focused on key challenges faced in using the new CCSS for transformative change. We would focus on school systems with sufficient numbers of leaders who share such a commitment. Our hypothesis is that using the tools and principles of systems thinking and organizational learning as laid out here can deepen and accelerate changes that could otherwise be achieved with the new CCSS.

We propose to undertake this next step in three stages:

1. Prototype a systems-based CCSS learning community with school systems we currently know and are working with: cf., the SoL Education partnership, one or more sites working with Fullan’s whole system change and perhaps from networks supported by the Hewlett Foundation. We could probably limit this group to 6-10 school systems and no more than 20-30 schools. We would develop and apply a set of ‘readiness criteria’ in selecting these sites, especially emphasizing leadership capacity building and transforming schools toward learning cultures, as well as technical capacity building.

   Based on this prototype we will learn how to support such a distributed community in terms of blended (face-to-face and distance) capacity building, technology, and resources. We will also start to generate an initial body of evidence to assess benefits for teachers, schools, and students. We will also use the research evidence to also revise readiness criteria.

   (approx 1 year starting summer 2012)

2. Extend this prototype to larger set of school systems (approx. 10-15 systems and 80-150 schools, including expansion to new schools within initial participating school systems, as well as adding new school systems) so as to test the scalability of the capacity building and change strategies. This will include more teachers and administrators who are new to the systems thinking and change methods. Expand resources to support larger network. Continue the assessment research with this larger network and revise capacity building strategies and readiness criteria.

   (1-2 years, starting summer 2013)

3. Make the platform open to all who wish to engage and meet the readiness criteria. Expand resources so as to be able to support an ever-growing number of sites. Target: to reach 100 systems within 4-5 years with scalable model that includes reliable cost estimates and a self-sustaining business-model. By end of prototyping process, we should be able to accurately estimate predictable up-front investment followed by diminishing investment over 3-4 years as learning communities become self sufficient and external capacity building support is needed less.

   (ready to start, summer 2014 or 15)
Overall change process works by expanding fluency and competency with tools and methods for whole system change based on best practices in schools and in private sector:

- continually building shared aims that express genuine aspirations (*vision*)
- capacity building via disciplined ongoing learning through doing: short cycle time, rapid feedback (*steer*)
- sharing widely what is working and what is not (*accelerate*)

Focus. The entire effort is focused on key substantive and pedagogical challenges identified by the community members – corresponding to key ‘gates’ in the overall K-12 progression, like 8th grade algebra and middle- and high school comprehension of complex non-fiction text (these challenges will get sorted out as the learning community takes shape in the coming weeks.) – as well as recurring leadership challenges like building effective teacher teams and nurturing a positive attitude about the CCSS as a vehicle for meaningful innovation.